

ABSTRACT

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Cultural Identity, Cultural Memory, and Dance in African American Literature

(Under the direction of Professor Anne Baker.)

Every era cultivates and projects distinct styles of dance in social settings and concert spaces. In the interwar years, fictional and non-fictional discourses on African American social and concert dance present the dancing body and the dancing space as a site of identity formation and communal solidarity while examining and embodying a history of oppression and discrimination. Recent studies of twentieth-century African American dance have explored the autonomous and subversive nature of performance for African Americans. However, these studies fail to fully incorporate the presence of dance in literature. An examination of textually presented dance from the early twentieth century reveals the ways that African American selfhood was defined and explored through the language of the body and the medium of dance.

I employ a New Historicist approach to situate dance scenes in poetry, short stories, and novels in context of how dance was depicted and discussed in film, news media, performance reviews, and critical discourse in the interwar years. I examine parallel developments in the Harlem Renaissance, the burgeoning modern dance movement, and the rise of popular Broadway dancers like Josephine Baker and Florence Mills in relation to the history of minstrelsy and the historical development of African American social dance forms. I explore the presence of Africanist dance principles as they were depicted and displayed in literature and on stage.

Early twentieth-century African American writers capitalized on the popularity of social and concert dance and contributed to the discourse delineating cultural distinction by using the body and kinesthetic movement to assert a distinct African American identity. The African American dancer on stage, in cabarets, and textually depicted in literature encompasses the conflict and negotiation of African American identity in the United States in the inter-war period.